
Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

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As usual it would be good to spend some time for meditation. For that purpose we sit in a comfortable, relaxed posture. Once we have a relaxed physical posture it is then important to ensure that we have a comfortable, relaxed state of mind. For our session this evening we have about an hour to spend in this relaxed state, with a relaxed body and mind. However on daily basis, even spending a few minutes, five minutes, in this state will have a positive effect upon our life. If we begin our day with a few minutes of meditation, it definitely contributes to a more meaningful, constructive and focused day.

It is important that we know the correct technique to relax the mind. While it is relatively easy to have a relaxed body, that does not necessarily bring about a genuinely relaxed state of mind. So how do we achieve a relaxed state of mind? It is none other than by training one's mind with the appropriate technique. To seize this opportunity when we have it is really important.

Training of the mind requires a conducive physical state as well. On a practical level we can see that maintaining a composed posture and a relaxed body, at the very least prevents us from going out and overly exerting ourselves in frivolous activities. Thus, it protects one's physical body to that extent, even if it is for a short period.

Adopting a composed physical and mental state is something that is within our own capacity. As achieving this is within our hands it is our responsibility. Having a relaxed body and mind is dependent on our willingness to adopt the correct techniques.

We might as well use ordinary everyday terms here, because the main point is for us to get a very clear understanding of what the technique involves. The meditation technique basically involves choosing an appropriate object and focusing our mind entirely on that object. It is as if we are binding our mind to that object for a while. So, in simple terms, the meditation technique is a means to fixate our mind to an appropriate object.

A specific state of mind, called mindfulness, serves as an aid to bind our mind to the object. Mindfulness is basically a state of mind that constantly remembers the object as way to constantly remind us to place our attention and focus on the chosen object. That is how mindfulness assists us to bind or fixate our mind to the object.

Adopting this meditation technique on a regular basis is training the mind, and helps us to withdraw our focus on distracting objects and bring our focus inward. It is something that we can all adopt. It is not something obscure or difficult. We can all manage this. While the technique itself is something that we can understand and is easy to adopt we will find we have difficulty maintaining our focus on the object.

The reason why we find it difficult to focus on the object is because the object that we choose is what we call an internal object. We find it difficult maintaining our focus on an internal object because our mind is habituated to focusing outward. We have the habit of placing our attention and focus on external things, external concerns. Therefore, when we begin to adopt this technique of focusing our attention on an internal object we find it difficult because this is not something that we are used to doing.

The main point that we need to understand is that the turmoil we experience internally—anxiety, fear, uncertainty and so forth—is the result of allowing our mind to be completely immersed in external things. That is why we experience that internal turmoil. So we need to recognise that as a fault and to try to change it.

When we apply this technique of focusing inward, placing our attention and focus on an inner object, we are reversing our habit of always focusing outward. People who try this technique initially find that they definitely experience a settled mind, along with a calm and tranquil experience. This experience of tranquillity and calmness is definitely experienced when one adopts this technique appropriately.

People have confided in me that while they do initially experience this, after some time they seem to lose that experience. They seem unable to maintain the feeling of tranquillity and calm that they initially felt. Nevertheless, when we apply the appropriate technique we will get that positive experience as result. So, it is a matter of maintaining the appropriate technique to get long-lasting results.

When we gain the positive experience of applying this technique, we will also begin to understand that obtaining a tranquil and calm state of mind is within our reach and within our own hands. It is from these practical experiences that we can see that the meditation technique brings about beneficial results for us.

Now there are, of course, many different types of meditation and different levels of meditation. Through meditation practice one can obtain high levels of single-pointed concentration that is called 'mental quiescence' or 'calm abiding'. There are also benefits for our future existence, if we believe in that. However for now, it is good for us to focus on the practical, immediate, positive results that we gain from the meditation. If we can see a practical benefit in our everyday lives right now then, based on that positive experience and result, we will be inspired to adopt the technique because we have found that it is useful for us.

One important point that we need to consider is that while adopting a physical posture might be relatively easy it doesn't guarantee a relaxed, calm state of mind. We can definitely notice from our own experience that while the physical body might be settled and sitting quietly and calmly, the mind can be still hyperactive. When the mind starts to speculate and goes off into different sorts of thoughts, including worries and anxieties, it can bring about a lot of turmoil within us. People have confided in me that even though there are no imminent, external conditions to cause them to worry and feel anxious, their thought patterns and speculations can bring about so much anxiety that they start to perspire. Our thoughts can really cause a lot of anxiety within us. Even though the physical body is completely neutral and settled the mind can be hyperactive. This definitely occurs.

The point here is that the meditation technique particularly involves settling down the mind, within a relaxed body, to

bring about a genuinely relaxed and calm state of mind. We need to really pay attention to how important a relaxed and calm state of mind is for our well-being. That is something we need to focus on.

We need to pay attention to having a little bit of control over our own state of mind, our emotions and so forth because, as people have confided in me, there are times when the mind experiences so much turmoil and angst. This particularly seems to be related to the angst and pangs of separation from a loved one. Even when they go to bed they are not able to sleep well. Because their tears keep flowing their whole pillow gets wet. These are just some indications of how unsettled the mind can be.

If one feels great angst or turmoil within one's mind due to external conditions and situations, it shows that one is lacking the wisdom to be able to assess one's situation. It is just an external condition that has occurred and, in fact, nothing has really changed in relation to one's own well-being and one's status. But, we allow external circumstances and conditions to affect us. It is when we allow it to affect us that it causes the pangs of separation and so forth. We need to understand that it is through our attitude that we might perceive something as being negative or a bad, helpless situation, and that then causes a lot of angst and worries. If we maintained a positive attitude, a similar situation would not affect us. So we need to see that how we feel is very much dependent on our state of mind and our attitudes.

To summarise the main points I am emphasising here. There are certain states of mind and attitudes that we call positive. These contribute to our well-being. Then there are a negative attitudes and states of mind that obstruct our well-being and actually harm us. Therefore, having recognised this, what we need to do is not allow ourselves to associate with these negative states of mind and attitudes by slowly overcoming the familiarity with them in our mind. We need to then familiarise ourselves, more and more, with the positive states of mind that contribute to our well-being.

In summary, meditation is nothing other than a technique that provides us with the method to familiarise ourselves with positive states of mind. We need to try to decrease or become less and less familiar with negativity and familiarise ourselves, more and more, with positive states of mind so that they become strengthened and further develop. This, in general, is the process.

This is the practical method to increase the happiness in one's mind. This is how I conduct myself and what I do in my daily life. I can guarantee it is not a mistaken path to choose—I don't think I've made any mistakes by choosing this path (*Geshe-la chuckles*). I say this because some people wonder if I might feel lonely when I stay in my room all day long by myself. These people may be relating to their own feelings when they say, 'Don't you feel lonely when you're up there by yourself?' In fact it's the opposite. I feel great joy when I'm alone doing my meditation practice. I experience so much joy that I am far from feeling the angst and pangs of loneliness.

While I may not be surrounded by external friends when I am by myself, I am not separated from my internal friend, the unfailing friend of positive states of mind. Making attempts to meditate on compassion towards all beings is a great solace and a source of strength and joy in one's mind. That is indeed the true unfailing friend. When one is not separated from these positive states of mind, there is no room for loneliness or feeling angst and so forth to arise.

I have explained the meditation technique regularly in the past. However, just to remind you, the object that one chooses to focus on is, as explained in the teachings, an internal object. What this means is that even if one chooses something external to focus on, one first familiarises oneself with the object and its features and aspect very well. Having looked at it carefully with our eyes it becomes a meditation object when we bring the image of that object to mind. It is that mental image of the object that we looked at earlier that we focus on in our meditation. Initially, when we are not well trained, it can be hard to bring up that mental image. That is why it is recommended to first look at the object very closely and know the object well. This will make it easier to bring up a mental image. Initially, it might be even an unclear outline of that object. However, as we continue to focus our mind on that mental image, it gradually becomes clearer and clearer. When we have a very clear, vivid image of the object, then we can train our mind to maintain a single-pointed focus on that.

The object that we choose to focus on for this evening's meditation is our own breath. This means that we internalise an image of the breath. We conjure up an image of the breath based on the natural inflow and outflow of our breath. We internalise that and imagine seeing the breath going in and out. This then becomes a mental image of the breath which is an internal object. That is what we will place our full attention and focus on.

As mentioned previously, what causes angst, turmoil and an agitated state of mind is our obsession with focusing on external objects or thoughts and so forth. So, for this period of meditation we need to withdraw our attention and focus from all other objects, whether they are external objects or thoughts and ideas and so forth. We completely withdraw from these and place our full attention and focus on the mental image of the breath. That is what we are going to be focusing on. We need to place 100% focus on the breath itself. It is in this way that we apply the appropriate technique of meditation. We will now engage in this practice for the next few minutes. (*Pause for meditation*)

If we keep the meditation going for too long the mind might start wandering off everywhere. It is important that we see the real significance of the meditation technique that we have adopted just now. Even in this short time, if we have applied this technique appropriately, we would have noticed that our mind begins to settle down as a consequence of withdrawing it from the influences of the negative states of mind and negative attitudes. When we withdraw from those negative states of mind, which includes the distractions and the frivolous thoughts, the mind settles down to its natural state. As the mind begins to become settled it naturally becomes clearer and more focused. Then positive states, such as a genuinely kind and considerate state of mind, a more loving and compassionate state of mind, will naturally increase. Those positive qualities of the mind will naturally come to the surface and take stronger root within us. That occurs in response to withdrawing our mind from the negative influences. This is how we need to understand the real significance of the practice.

A further significant outcome of adopting the meditation technique is that we will begin to recognise for ourselves our own states of mind. As we begin to recognise our own states of mind it would become quite apparent that certain states of mind, which we classify as negative states of mind, definitely harm us. It is our own negative attitudes that

cause so much turmoil, unhappiness and sorrow in our mind. We will also begin to detect that what we classify as positive states of mind actually contribute to our well-being. As we start to cultivate these positive attitudes within us we will begin to experience a genuine sense of relaxation and joy within our mind.

From this we will then be able to understand how the meditation technique helps to promote what we call genuine insight or wisdom, which will assist us in making the right choices regarding which attitudes to adopt and which to discard. This is really essential. This wisdom, or insight, that we develop becomes something that will assist us throughout our lives. So we need to cultivate that wisdom or insight.

Further, we will also be able to detect what it is that initiates the activities that we engage in. When we look into what is initiating our activity we will find that it is none other than a state of mind within us which is called intention. It is the intention that comes from within our mind that pushes us, compels us, to engage in an activity. So, specific kinds of intention determine the type of activity we engage in.

If we recognise that then we will begin to notice for ourselves that when the intention to engage in an activity arises we could hold back before we engage in the activity and check what kind of intention and state of mind is initiating it. Is it a positive intention, or is it a negative intention? Whenever we find ourselves intending to engage in an activity which, by its nature, is harmful to ourselves or others we will be able to detect the negative intention. We need to separate ourselves from that intention. It is as if we are being influenced by a negative friend, which is the negative intention that makes us engage in an activity that is harmful. In this case, of course, it is our own intention, but when we separate ourselves from that intention we can stop and think, 'Okay, I am not going to allow this negative intention to influence me. If I engage in an activity under the influence of this negative intention the outcome would be harmful to myself and others'. That recognition itself will help us not to be impulsive and not immediately engage in an activity. As soon as the intention arises, we take a stance and check whether we should engage in that activity or not. If it comes from a positive intention, then of course the outcome will be positive.

It is important that we recognise this. It is very important for us to recognise that the real cause of the disturbances within us, is those negative states of mind, which, when we are under their influence, we start feeling uncomfortable and uneasy. We might normally follow the distractions as a way not to feel too depressed or overwhelmed. We might allow ourselves to go out with friends and have a good time and to a certain degree we might have an enjoyable time. But when that enjoyable time we spend with a friend, or a companion, or just enjoying ourselves with some mundane activity, is over, we are again left by ourselves and we start feeling the pain and angst within us again. If we are feeling unsettled, not quite right and melancholy it is important for us to recognise what is causing that. Resorting to having a good time with our friends does not solve the problem. If it solved the problem, the problem would be gone by now. But every time we find that we still have that same unsettled feeling. So it is really important that we recognise what is causing that and try to apply methods and means to overcome the very core of our problems. That is the main point.

Lama Tsong Khapa, the great Tibetan master, said that if our mind is kind then our practice – such as the grounds and paths – will be very positive and good. But if we have a negative state of mind then even the practices that we do will also be negative.

What I have been trying to relate and share with you in very simple terms and practical ways is something that I have found beneficial myself. It is because I have found these practices, applying self-analysis and self-investigation methods, really helpful in my own life that I share it with you. I have confidence that because we are all same human beings, we all carry the same potential. Therefore I feel that if it has helped me and helped to transform my life for the better, then by sharing it with you with confidence it will also help you to make a positive transformation.

With the remaining few minutes we have, we can address any questions you may have. Raise your hand if you have a question.

Question: Last week you talked about walking meditation. Can you expand on that?

Answer: That discussion was in response to someone who had raised the question about whether it is okay to meditate in a park. My response to that was, 'Well, that's fine as long as you are doing it with the right intentions and you are not doing it to get more attention from others, and showing a pompous display of meditating. It should be fine if your motivation or intention is in the right place.' In discussing that, I mentioned that one does not necessarily have to be sitting down, one could also be walking. One's mind can be in a meditative state when one is walking. There are specific instructions about walking meditation. The main point is to maintain a focused mind when one is walking. One has to find a level surface because otherwise if one were to withdraw and focus inwardly there would be a danger that you could trip over (*Geshe-la laughs*). That could be dangerous. Therefore walking meditation has to be done in an area that we know has level ground and is safe. As you take each step there are appropriate ways of keeping one's attention focused on that. There is a very gradual, slow process that one adopts.

This practice actually comes from an ancient tradition. Normally when monks were meditating the advice was initially to have a composed sitting posture. In prolonged meditation in a sitting posture some monks would, of course, start to doze off and fall asleep (*laughter*). As a way to prevent them from falling asleep there was something they would tie around their forehead that, if they nodded off, would cause something like cold water to drip on them to wake them up. If taking those measures couldn't prevent them from falling asleep then they used a technique of walking along holding a rope so that they would go in the right direction.

The main point of the meditation technique is to maintain one's focus. If one is able to maintain once focus then the physical position is not that important. One could be sitting or standing or walking or even lying down. One could still be meditating if one's mind is focused.

Question: Geshe-la. I was wondering if you could explain what role intuition plays in Buddhism. Is it a subtle state of mind, and how do we know when to trust it?

Answer: As to what level of mind intuition may be, I suppose there may be different levels of intuition, some grosser and some subtler. However, what you call intuition may also

come from a mind that has been trained in doing thorough investigation. When the mind has trained in investigation then, based on the intelligence that one gains from investigation, one will be able to assess the situation or people correctly based on one's investigation.

On another level, as one develops one's mind more and more through the practice of meditation one can develop single-pointed focus to the point one reaches a state of what we call 'calm abiding'. When one reaches that state then naturally, as a consequence of obtaining calm abiding, one obtains clairvoyance which means that one's level of intuition has reached a really profound level of knowing, not having to guess but really knowing. That is what we call clairvoyance. However, even within clairvoyance there seems to be different levels. There are some levels of clairvoyance that may have some knowledge of others' minds but not really thorough and is still on a gross level.

It seems to be a natural occurrence for young children, infants, to have the capacity of having a really clear mind. This occurs particularly in relation to remembering things from the past. I know one Rinpoche, the term we give to a reincarnated Lama, who confided in me that when he was very young he had very clear and vivid memories. But, as he started to grow up the clarity started to fade away. There seems to be those natural occurrences as well.

This sort of knowing does not seem to be restricted just to humans. Some animals, particularly some birds, seem to be able to have that far-sighted knowledge of things. They know if there is prey or can detect fire from a distance. They seem to be able to know that, even when it is not close by and they are not able to see it. That is described in the Buddhist scriptures as a form of clairvoyance as well, but not real clairvoyance.

I can give another example involving a child I knew when he was young. One of the previous interpreters here, Sandup, has a son Tenzin who, when he was just a toddler, would mention things about the distances of stars and planets and so forth when no one had taught him that. Sandup said to me, 'I wonder who taught him that. There is no one who taught him about this. How come he is mentioning all of this?' So these are quite unique instances.

One of the sons of another member, Chonyi, used to talk about tigers when he was very young. He identified with a tiger and moved and conducted himself like a tiger. That again is a unique feature, identifying with a certain kind of animal and internalising its aspects.

Question: Sometimes this feeling is a very strong knowing and you can say that it's clairvoyance or insight. Sometimes it's more like an obscure image. How would you then check to know if it's actually true? Could our minds be playing tricks?

Answer: It is true. Sometimes our mind does play tricks and it could be misleading. That is definitely true. For example, some who are really ill, especially with a high fever, can become quite delusional. In one instance an ill person said, "My mother is coming". No one else could see his or her mother; there was definitely no one there. But, for this individual it was real. The image he saw of his mother was just a hallucination.

Sometimes certain kinds of medication can also do this. I can relate an instance of this when I was teaching at Kopan monastery in Nepal. Someone offered us acupuncture. I declined but another geshe accepted and it didn't work well

for him. (*Geshe-la mimics the illness and students laugh*). Eventually, because that didn't relieve his cough the doctor gave him some medication. I was quite close to this geshe and he confided in me, 'The doctor gave me some very good medicine. It makes me feel very calm and I see many flowers... (*lots of laughter*) and the sky seems like it is moving'. I didn't know it at that time, but I was informed later that sometimes when medications are not administered or taken properly they can cause hallucinations.

Those questions were good. Thank you very much. There are different states and we begin to slowly access them through our own experience.

Before we conclude the session for the evening let us again take an opportunity to spend a few minutes in meditation. This time we can use the sound of the mantra being recited as our object to focus on. As we hear the recitation of the mantra let us put our full attention and focus on that sound. Then, as the sound subsides, we try to maintain that sense of emptiness or vacuity and just apply our attention to that for a few minutes. That will suffice for our meditation.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNIYE SOHA.

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